

News From the Legislature

State Representative Ross Hunter



Keeping in touch

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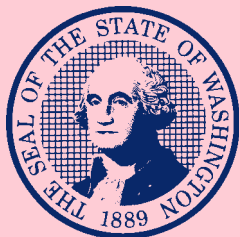
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A Report to the 48th District

February 2004

Dear Neighbors:

It's an honor and a pleasure to represent all of you from the 48th district. The 2004 session is off to a rolling start, and we have only 60 days to get our business done. Thank you for taking the time to read this preview of what I'm doing in Olympia.

Last year we were able to pass legislation that retained the aerospace industry, the Boeing 7E7 Dreamliner, and make a significant investment in our transportation infrastructure for the first time in a dozen years. We passed a balanced budget despite a \$2.7 billion shortfall. Unfortunately, it took us into June to get this all done.

My goal this year is to continue to improve the economy, create good paying jobs, make health care more affordable and invest in education. I will focus my efforts on legislation in these areas, with only a small side journey to fix the write-in ballot statute that caused so much trouble in the Medina City Council election this fall.

I will keep you posted on the results of the legislative session. Visit my website at www.hunter.nu or hdc.leg.wa.gov to get regular updates, or call, e-mail or visit me here in Olympia. When I hear your concerns and ideas, it helps me make better decisions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ross Hunter".

Ross Hunter

Visit www.hunter.nu for the latest news. You will find:

- Links to bills of interest, so you can see their current status
- Surveys on what you think about issues
- Links to contact me about specific issues
- Information on how to get involved

JOBS:

Invest in the future by creating high-paying jobs with benefits

Compared to a year ago we are seeing some light in our economic future. This reaffirms my belief that we did the right things last session by passing transportation improvements and sticking to the Priorities of Government budget plan. This year we should continue that forward progress, to create and retain more high-paying jobs in Washington.

This year a set of tax incentives passed 10 years ago by Gov. Lowry are set to expire. It's appropriate to take a look at tax incentives regularly to make sure that they still make sense. These do, bringing jobs and increased research and development investment into the state. We will make sure that we are collecting data to ensure their continued effectiveness and then renew the incentives for another 6-10 years.

Governor Locke has reinstated the Competitiveness Council, and they have outlined some goals for us to shoot for in Washington. I support most of their work – we will not be able to create the job base we need without a vibrant business climate.

EDUCATION:

Kids are the future of our communities and economy

Most of my energy in Olympia is focused on helping educate our children for future school and career success. Education is very expensive, and to many people it seems that there is increasing pressure for children to achieve in school and go to college. The world has changed significantly since I graduated from high school 25 years ago. Back then, over 40% of jobs were "unskilled," yet still paid a decent wage. Today that percentage is down to 15%, and it continues to drop. Kids need some post-secondary experience to prepare them to make a living.

A conundrum: Microsoft has thousands of open jobs, but our state has one of the highest unemployment rates in the nation. Only 8% of Microsoft's hires come from Washington. This is nuts. I think we can do better with our education system, and I strongly support a number of key bills this session that will improve schools in our state.

Simple majority

We should be able to pass school levies with a 50%+1 yes vote. Levies have become a crucial part of "basic education" and districts could not adequately educate their students without them. In Lake Washington, Bellevue and Issaquah school districts, we regularly pass levies with 70-80% approval, but passing necessary levies is more difficult for other districts. This stress on the system blocks our ability to make other necessary changes.

Education finance study:

Find the best way to pay for our schools

In my first year in the legislature I worked to become an expert in school funding. With education reform we have changed to measuring what our children learn in school, not how long they stay there, but our funding system only cares about seat time. Arbitrary differences between the ability of districts to pay teacher salaries and raise levies only exacerbate labor strife.

The most important step we can take is funding a comprehensive study of our state's entire school funding system, as it is impossible to change any one component of it in isolation.

Last year I proposed an education finance study bill to redesign the system and help us find how school and student dollars can make the most impact. I am re-introducing the bill (HB 2955) this year. This bill can give us a total view of the funding system and give us a tool to make smart money decisions about education. Here's what I would like to know:

- **How much does it take to educate individual children?** What is adequate? This study will help us to look at factors such as special needs and English-language learning.
- **What funding methods can we use to best attract and retain highly qualified teachers?** We can design funding ideas that reward teachers for improving their skills and knowledge in ways that improve student learning. We can also recognize that teachers who live on the Eastside face a significantly higher cost of living than do teachers in eastern Washington, and that we might have to pay a bit more to get qualified high school math teachers.
- **What is the best way for taxpayers to get their money's worth?** Education funding should not be a mysterious black box. We should all be able to know where the money comes from and where the money goes in our schools, with transparent budget information that shows exactly how our children's education dollars are spent.

WASL Reforms (HB 2195)

This major piece of legislation clarifies the 1993 education reform agenda, and reduces the “high-stakes” nature of the WASL test. Kids should be allowed to retake portions of the test that they don’t pass the first time, and we should have an alternate assessment for kids who have special problems taking standardized tests.

Levy base changes (HB 2044)

I’m pushing again for changes to the way levy tax bases are determined. This bill ensures that school districts that have approved local school levies will be able to collect the full value approved by the voters. When state funding decreases, local levy authority decreases. This bill will eliminate part of this double whammy. This bill doesn’t require any state money and it does not hurt any district. It will level the playing field painlessly, and help districts attract good educators.

Charter public schools (HB 2295)

An enhancement of the public school system

This year, we have crafted a limited, thoughtful charter school bill that will show us if this idea will work at bridging the academic achievement gap. As part of the public school system, charters let districts, parents and community organizations create high-quality public schools. This year’s bill focuses on charter schools for educationally disadvantaged students. Charter public schools are accountable in ways regular public schools are not, since they close down if they fail, parents can vote with their feet, students must take the same tests, and the schools face more rigorous auditing. It should be about doing what’s best for the kids, and this carefully constructed bill does that.

AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE:

Particularly for small businesses.

To create more high-paying jobs with benefits, we need to find ways to lower the costs and stop the volatility of health care costs for small businesses. I talked to Sucker Punch Productions, a small software company in our district that makes the video game “Sly Cooper,” this fall about what we could do to improve their situation. Not only do they face double-digit increases in health care costs, they are hit with a constantly rotating buffet of health care plans. Who wants to switch doc-

tors or plans every year? This inconsistency and inconvenience makes it hard for small businesses like Sucker Punch to maintain stable, low-cost health care for their employees.

Sucker Punch is a great place to work, and we need to keep rising medical costs from blocking their expansion.

Medical Malpractice Reform: Better ways to improve patient safety while lowering insurance premiums

In recent years, medical malpractice insurance premiums have climbed tremendously. Premiums for liability insurance are too high for many businesses and individuals. It is starting to affect our ability to get medical care.

Plainly, we need a solution. We need a reasoned, fiscally sound package of reforms to help doctors and other health care providers afford medical malpractice insurance, while preserving the rights of injured patients. The Governor and the Insurance Commissioner have introduced legislation that could curb the rising cost of premiums and still provide deserved compensation to injured people. Something must be done.

TRANSPORTATION:

I remain excited that we passed a transportation plan last session for the first time in a dozen years. The transportation plan passed by the legislature this year is focused on improvements that will keep businesses in the state, a major part of Competitiveness Council recommendations. Next, we need a balanced package on the Regional Transportation Investment District (RTID) that can pass at the polls.

Specific projects in our area under way thanks to last year’s transportation package—which can finally start unraveling the traffic knots in our region—include a new lane and HOV improvements on I-405, and two lanes on SR 520.



ISSUES WITH ELECTIONS

The recent Medina city council election showed us a flaw in the state law about write-in candidates. We had a court case to determine the outcome of the election when 29 write-in votes were not counted because the oval was not filled in. I introduced legislation with strong bipartisan support this session to fix state statutes on write-in elections. It will require write-in votes to be counted even if the voter forgets to fill in the oval when they write-in the name of a candidate. The voter's intent is very clear and we should honor it. Voting is critically important in a democracy and government must ensure that every vote by every voter counts.

The last big issue is how we vote in regular primaries. The major parties in the state sued to overturn the "blanket" primary we've used in Washington for decades. In a blanket primary you can vote for whatever candidate you want, regardless of party. The parties want a system where you have to identify yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Green, Libertarian, and can only influence the selection of candidates for that party. I like the system we have today, as do about 80% of the voters. We will have to produce a new system as a result of a court order. There are several choices, and the debate will be long and loud. I will vote to maintain your privacy, and to give you as much choice as possible, consistent with the court ruling.

KEEPING IN TOUCH:

I hope to see many of you at my Town Hall Meetings on Saturday, February 21.

I encourage everybody to sign up for my e-newsletter, which is packed with healthy portions of my thoughts and analysis on bills and my personal experience in the Legislature. Go to www.hunter.nu to get connected. No state resources are used when sending out my e-newsletters and they are not official state publications.

Finally, please drop by my office in Olympia during session to talk with me or to testify on a bill you feel passionately about. Call my legislative assistant Becky Penn to set up an appointment. If you can't make it to Olympia, please send me an email at hunter_ro@leg.wa.gov or call 1-800-562-6000 (1-800-635-9993 for the hearing impaired). I look forward to hearing from you.

GO TO WWW.HUNTER.NU TO SIGN UP FOR MY E-NEWSLETTER

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